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TAGS: [KIRF](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [IZ](#)
SUBJECT: CHRISTIAN ELECTION BOYCOTT THREATS: A ROAD TO
NOWHERE

REF: A. BAGHDAD 3506
[1](#)B. BAGHDAD 3538

Classified By: Ambassador Ryan C. Crocker for Reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Christian religious and political leaders continue to sound off against the paucity of guaranteed seats -- one each for Baghdad, Basrah, and Ninewa -- allocated to them following the Council of Representatives' November 3 vote on Article 50. The threat of a boycott of the provincial elections by at least some minority groups -- Christians among them -- remains very real. Private comments to us by leading Christian figures mirror their emotional public pronouncements -- namely, that the vote result is insulting to minorities, who would prefer no quota at all to the minimalist one tossed to them. Lost in the outburst is any acknowledgment that Article 50 provides a floor, not a ceiling, for Christian representation and that the Sunni boycott of the 2005 national elections was a disaster for the Sunni political power, a realization now widely accepted within the Sunni community.

[1](#)2. (C) Both the Ambassador and Poloffs have had numerous conversations with Christian leaders in the last few days, emphasizing the following points: while less than what the minorities sought, the quota establishes a principle of guaranteed minority representation that hitherto did not exist, a gain the minorities can build on for the future; rather than boycotting the elections, minorities should demonstrate their strategic relevance in places like Ninewa and Baghdad; the core issue is political symbolism, not actual seat numbers; there are other levers the minorities can pull, such as pressing the Presidency Council or the PM for a public statement reiterating that all of Iraq's communities, including Christians, have a role in the country's future; and the boycott is counter-productive to the long-term interests of the minority groups. Moreover, we remind the Christian political leaders that they have been unable to secure many votes in the parliament to support their seat quota demands. Since July the Christians have been seeking three seats in Ninewa and Baghdad provincial councils and no large numbers of either Sunni nor Shia Arab deputies have supported them. So far, however, our Christian contacts have not been swayed and are digging in their heels. Some leaders go far as to predict that Christians will continue leaving the country in response.

[1](#)3. (C) As the Ambassador told Christian leaders on November 5, rather than reject the Article 50 vote, Iraq's Christians should seize on the gains and move forward. A useful reference point is that low Sunni participation in January 2005 elections resulted in the induction of only 16 Sunni Arabs (out of 275 members) to the then Transitional National Assembly (TNA). By the December 2005 elections, the Sunnis had realized their mistake, voted massively, and elected 59 Sunni Arabs (out of 275 members) to the CoR. (Note: The TNA was the precursor of the CoR. End note.)

[1](#)4. (C) A national census is planned for October 2009, and minorities will have an opportunity to justify their

demands for more seats, provided they cooperate with the census taking. It is important that Christian leaders, as well as other minority leaders, set aside some of their differences and take unified positions on issues central to their political future. The GOI and other politicians would be more likely to listen and act to protect minorities' interests if the Christian community stood together, or even joined forces with other minorities to lobby for their cause.

An example of what helping one another can achieve is the assigning of a seat for the Sabaeen-Mandaean minority in Baghdad. Christian parliamentarian Younadam Kanna, in particular, worked hard to achieve this.

15. (C) While the perils of a Christian political boycott are clear to us, there are limits to what we can do to press Iraqi Christians to see and accept those perils themselves. They will make their own decisions and face the consequences, however negative they are. Efforts to get Christian leaders to stay engaged in the political process could lead some Christian hardliners to challenge publicly our credentials as "real friends" of the Christians. On the other hand, too much public Solicitousness toward Christian political goals could trigger a backlash among non-minority communities objecting to our "excessive" support for Christians. If Christians in Ninewa stay away from the polls, then Kurdish, Sunni and Shi'a Arab, and Turkmen parties will divide provincial council seats among them. Although there could be Christian councilors elected (especially on the Kurdish alliance list, as in the last round), there would be no one on the Council to champion independent Christian interests.

16. (C) It is not clear whether all Christian voters would

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refuse to go to the polls if prominent Christian politicians and parties refuse to take part. Other ethnic blocs may seek to attract Christian votes, which offers some hope that they would compete to be the most "Christian friendly." It is also possible that Kurdish or former Ba'athist parties could try to intimidate Christians into going to the polls and voting their slates, as they have been accused of in the past. International observers will want to be on the lookout for that possibility, and we will want to make clear that any political blocs that intimidate Christian voters will pay a price in their relations with us.

17. (C) We will keep pressing Iraq's minority leaders to avoid decisions that undermine the long-term political viability of their communities in Iraq and -- more immediately -- to withhold a decision on the boycott. The passage of time could help the minorities soften their stance. At the same time, we will encourage the GOI leadership to issue positive statements about the important role minorities play in the future of Iraq. We will also coordinate with the Papal Nuncio, the EU mission here and UNAMI.

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